Dozens of birds, including ones named after white supremacists, are being renamed

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Dozens of bird species in the United States and Canada will get "imaginative" new names that reflect their traits and habitats rather than the names of people, the American Ornithological Society announced Wednesday.

The society plans to remove all human names from the common names for birds within its jurisdiction, to create a more inclusive environment for people of diverse backgrounds interested in bird-watching and ornithology. The public process, yet to be fully defined, will include 70 to 80 birds in the U.S. and Canada, the society stated.

Following years of controversy over bird names linked to people with racist and genocidal histories, the society's decision thrills ornithologists and scientists who supported a campaign to name birds for themselves.

"I'm really excited about this change," said Corina Newsome, an ornithologist who was among a group of dozens of Black outdoor enthusiasts that launched the first Black Birders Week in May 2020.

"It’s a major change in how we think about bird names," said Sushma Reddy, secretary of the society and the Breckenridge Chair of Ornithology at the University of Minnesota. "We came to the decision that we really want bird names to be about birds."

The society wants new bird-watchers hearing bird names for the first time to "feel this is a welcoming environment for people from different backgrounds and just enjoy nature for what it is," Reddy said. "Birds are for everybody. Science is for everybody."

Although the project was initiated in part "to address past wrongs" over links to historical figures known for their support of slavery or genocide of Indigenous peoples, the Society plans to remove all honorific human names. A committee that considered the recommendations noted the blanket removal would avoid

potentially contentious value judgments about the character and morality of individuals from the past.

New bird names will favor more descriptive names like the blue-footed booby or red-headed woodpecker rather than nebulous names like Ross' goose or Bachman's sparrow that give no clues about how to identify the bird.

"We're hoping to be imaginative about this," said noted naturalist and author Kenn Kaufman. "It's a great chance to come up with beautiful and evocative ways of describing the visual appearance, song, or habitat they live in."

The committee also proposes to change names considered derogatory or culturally inappropriate for three other birds: the flesh-footed shearwater; Eskimo curlew, and Inca dove.

A welcome announcement

"I was honestly very surprised they came to this decision," Newsome told USA TODAY. "It fosters a more equitable approach to learning about the living world."

She first started noticing "bizarre names" associated with species' names when she began memorizing names in college.

"I noticed names that described how the species looked or how it acted in some way were easier to remember than species with an honorific name," she said. Later in college, she became uncomfortable with the general practice of naming other living things after people, she said. When she began to learn more about the people behind some of the names, she found it "even more upsetting."

Several events helped kick off the society's multiyear deliberations over bird renaming.

In 2018, college student Robert Driver proposed renaming McCown's longspur. The small bird that lives on shortgrass prairies in the Central United States was named for John P. McCown, who first collected a specimen of the species in 1851. That was before he fought in the Seminole Indian War in Florida in 1856 and 1857, before he participated in an expedition against Mormons in Utah in 1858 and before he became a general in the Confederate Army in 1861, according to the Central Arkansas Library System. Driver's renaming proposal was rejected, to the dismay of many birders.

In the spring of 2020, major events sparked a national outcry, protests over racism and police brutality, and a renewed focus on racism in the U.S. Two of those occurred on May 25. A white woman in Central Park called the police and

falsely accused Black birder Christian Cooper of threatening her after he asked her to put her dog on a leash. Then in Minneapolis, police killed George Floyd.

By August of 2020, the society was looking at things differently. It accepted a rewritten proposal from Driver and a co-author and the longspur was renamed the thick-billed longspur. Other birders and ornithologists also were calling for the removal of names associated with past racism. The society apologized for derogatory remarks by a member about Hawaiian bird names distributed in 2011 documents and began some of the initial steps that led to Wednesday's announcement.

What's in a name?

Kaufman, who has been in the bird business nearly his entire life, was among those initially reluctant to support changing dozens of bird names.

"It's easy to get set in your ways," he said. "I believed in the value of stability. Having stable names makes it easier for people to communicate." He's also seen the mass confusion among bird-watchers when species have been split or combined for taxonomic purposes.

But after the 2020 rejection of Driver's proposal, Kaufman was struck by the "vocal outcry, mostly from younger ornithologists and bird conservationists." He began to be persuaded during a conversation with two of those ornithologists, Jordan Rutter and Gabriel Foley, who launched their Bird Names for Birds campaign in 2020.

Rutter and Foley argued some of the bird names were essentially verbal Confederate monuments, he said. "At a time when the bird community was trying to become more inclusive, it seems like that maybe would be a barrier."

After talking to dozens of fellow birders of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, he said he was convinced renaming was the best option.

While researching a book on the history of ornithology in early America, Kaufman started "coming across more names of people with birds named after them that would be unsavory by modern standards," he said. "A few of these names are really genuinely offensive to people of color."

"If you have a bird named for a person who was an avowed white supremacist, who preached the inferiority of Black people and it's found mainly in the South, if people research the history, they're going to find it offensive," he said. One example often cited is the Scott's oriole, named for Winfield Scott, a military general responsible for the Trail of Tears.

America's birds are under siege. These are among the most at risk for extinction.

How renaming will work

A pilot project will begin in 2024, starting with an initial group from among the 70-80 birds that will be renamed in the U.S. and Canada, the Society said. In total over time, up to 260 birds with people's names could be reviewed across the Americas and associated islands.

The society, which now has two naming committees, one each for North and South America, will appoint a third committee specifically for the review of English common names. Reddy said the group will include not only experts in taxonomy but also experts in social science and communication.

The public will be invited to suggest names, which Reddy hopes will build more excitement to learn about birds.

"It’s going to be a slow and deliberative process," Kaufman said, with "lots of opportunities for public input."

Addressing past wrongs in the scientific world

These aren't the first birds to be renamed, and similar events have occurred as other science groups wrestle with the past. The society's predecessor, the American Ornithologist's Union, changed the name of the Oldsquaw duck to the long-tailed duck in 2000, according to a July 2000 update in the organization's magazine.

In 2001, the American Fisheries Society changed the name of a fish once known as jewfish to Goliath grouper.

The Entomological Society of America revamped its guidelines in 2021, barring insect names that referenced ethnic or racial groups.

The National Audubon Society also has struggled with the controversial past of its namesake, John James Audubon. Earlier this year, the society announced it had considered but rejected adopting a new name.

The decision prompted several local and state chapters to drop the Audubon name. Among the renamed chapters are the Golden Gate Bird Alliance in California and the Badgerland Bird Alliance in Madison, Wisconsin.